RACE TO THE TOP EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE

HOW NEVADA SCORED: LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council

Starting early is starting right on time.

A Review of Nevada's Application and Plan – Strengths, Weaknesses and Where We Go from Here

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I.   Introduction

In October 2011, Nevada joined the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) to apply for federal funding to build an integrated system of early learning and development for Nevada's infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Governor Sandoval appointed the Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC), managed by the Head Start Collaboration and Early Childhood Systems Office in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), to provide leadership in developing a proposal. Through the competition, Nevada created plans to increase access to high-quality programs for children from low-income families, providing more children from birth to age 5 with the strong foundation they need for success in school and beyond.

The final application was the result of significant input from dozens of stakeholders throughout the state, and it put forth a comprehensive reform agenda and plan which would be jointly managed by DHHS and the Nevada Department of Education (NDE), if funded. The vision guiding this plan is **Nevada's children will be safe, healthy, and thriving during the first eight years of life, and the system will support children and families in achieving their full potential.** This important work aligns statewide and local resources and priorities around the best interests of Nevada's children, to ultimately ensure that our youth are ready to compete in the global economy of the 21st century.

In mid-December, the United States Department of Education (DoE) awarded $500 million in grants to the nine states that won the competition, out of a total of 37 applicants. Unfortunately, Nevada was not among the winners. The White House considers Race to the Top to be one of its most successful domestic policy achievements because virtually all states – including Nevada - have devoted time and money toward education reforms, even if they haven't won any of the competitions.   Nevada's application stressed these initiatives:

- Adopting a common school readiness assessment tool for children entering kindergarten that is linked with the State's longitudinal data system for education;
- Developing an early childhood data system used to drive program quality and improve school readiness;
- Improving and streamlining state oversight of early childhood education;
- Implementing a statewide tiered quality rating and improvement system for programs tied to child outcomes;
- Improving access to high quality programs for young children with high needs; and
- Developing a high quality early childhood education workforce.

This report looks at the lessons to be learned and the advantages to be gained from Nevada's considerable investment in this application process. In addition to summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of Nevada's plan and determining what can be gleaned from them, this report puts forth a set of recommendations and steps that can be taken to ensure Nevadans reap the benefits this experience yielded, regardless of whether the plan was funded. Those involved in putting this plan together are committed to its pursuit, recognizing that the reform articulated in the application will

result in a more unified approach to supporting young children and their families — one that helps ensure that children enter kindergarten with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful.

II.   Overview & Observations

This was the third iteration of the federal Race to the Top funding initiative, and Nevada's second go-round in a $1 billion-plus grant program designed to encourage broad education reform.   The applications were reviewed by more than 80 peer review panelists who scored and commented on the plans to improve early education in 35 states, plus Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. Out of 37 applicants competing for a portion of $500 million in federal funding for early childhood education systems in the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), Nevada's proposal ranked 29th, earning 60% of the available (300) points. (See graphic below on how all applicants ranked.)

Only nine states were funded, with North Carolina receiving the highest score (269.6 points), compared to Nevada's score of 179.6 points. No state won more than 90% of the possible points. The other winners, in descending order, are Massachusetts, Washington, Delaware, Ohio, Maryland, Minnesota, Rhode Island and California. They will receive grants ranging from $44 million to $70 million, based on the state's student population, to significantly improve early education programs in their states.

To win, states had to demonstrate a strong state infrastructure, design quality rating and improvement systems for their early childhood programs, demonstrate existence of appropriate standards, design a comprehensive assessment system to track quality of environments for and learning of young children, and establish clear expectations for early childhood educator qualifications. The merits of Nevada's proposal aside, there was a wild swing in scores among the five judges that scored it. On a 280-point scale, the difference between the highest-scoring judge and the lowest-scoring judge was a significant

RTT-ELC Rank Order Final Score
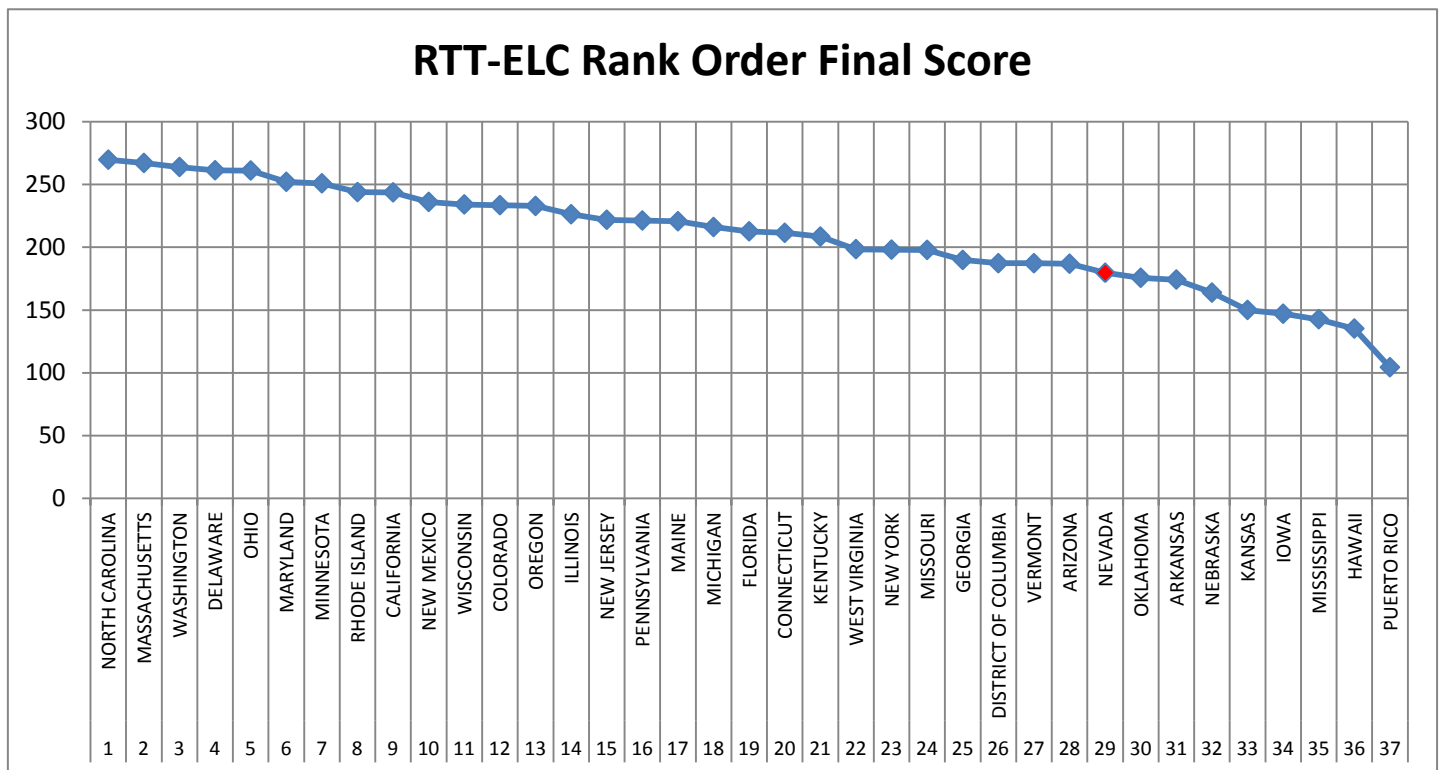
83 points, which was enough to make the difference between a winning and losing application.

Compared to earlier rounds of Race to the Top, where states had 25 weeks to apply, the Early Learning Challenge only provided eight weeks. This compressed timeline made it difficult for Nevada to position itself as well as it might have for the competition had there been more lead time to conduct the detailed planning or initiate major policy/regulatory changes that seemed to be needed to score well. Even so, the process spurred Nevada to articulate an ambitious plan for overhauling its early childhood system. Indeed, Nevada's leaders have already confirmed intentions and dedicated funding to continue working on certain parts of the plan (see brief description of initiatives #1 and #2 below), in spite of not winning an award in this round.

In a matter of two months, early education and child development stakeholders from across Nevada, together with state and local leaders, undertook the massive task of crafting a comprehensive plan for expanding access to high-quality early learning and development programs (ELDP). The final result, albeit unfunded at this time, would create greater opportunities for more children in the state, and undoubtedly pave the way for significant reform in Nevada's systems of early childhood learning and care. The 420-page application for Nevada requested a total of $49.5 million over four years to fund the following statewide early learning initiatives:

1. **Kindergarten Entry Assessment** – During the first year, facilitated planning and engagement of localities will be conducted to achieve consensus in selecting a common kindergarten entry assessment tool. This will be incorporated into the corresponding statewide data collection system to measure status of children's skills, knowledge and development upon school entry. The selected tool will not be used to screen children out of eligibility for kindergarten based on low scores, but to track where children are on a continuum of learning and development upon entry into kindergarten. Long term tracking of this data will allow state leadership and decision makers to see how reforms implemented as part of this project have impacted children's readiness for school over the period of four years of funding from this grant and beyond. Funding for this project will be used for developing the database, purchasing (or licensing use) of the selected kindergarten entry assessment tool, and provide intensive education for kindergarten teachers and school administrators using the tool.

2. **Unified Data System** – In the first year of the grant, strategic planning will be conducted that includes a feasibility plan for building and implementing a unified data system for early childhood that accommodates cross-system information sharing and allows tracking of progress on performance measures for each child served by *Nevada's Promise*. Common data elements that will be derived from the shared use of screening and assessment instruments will be defined during the first year of the grant as well. Planning will address how privacy laws and regulations will be maintained for each participating entity. NDE will include early childhood data into its longitudinal data tracking system. During the second year, the data system will be built and tested. During the third year, data in areas where children with high needs comprise the highest percentage of the population will be collected and aggregated. During the fourth year, data collection and tracking will be conducted statewide. Funds requested for this project

support the building of the data system itself including estimated cost of contracts to build local and state level linkages to the statewide longitudinal database housed in NDE.

3. **Silver State Stars** – Nevada's tiered QRIS will center around the comprehensive assessment system described in the proposal including the Environmental Rating Scales (ECERS-R, ITERS-R, etc.), the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3), and either a list of formative assessment tools from which early childhood educators and programs can choose, or possibly the selection of one common assessment tracking the same domains and skills as the one kindergarten entry assessment. The decision regarding formative assessment will be made during the first year of the grant. Over the four years of this project, all publicly funded programs will adopt the comprehensive assessment system tools, enabling both public and private Early Learning and Development programs to participate in and be rated according to Nevada's Silver State Stars. Funding for this project would primarily support performance contracts with local early learning and development programs to improve the quality of their programs, as measured by tools described within Nevada's comprehensive assessment system, in order to provide high quality care to children with high needs at no or low cost.

4. **Workforce Development** – A high quality system of early childhood care and education relies on a highly qualified workforce. DHHS will fund professional development activities leading to credentials for professionals working with children in a multitude of Early Learning and Development Programs. Funding will be used to support teachers in attaining degrees, building on already significant investments from programs such as Child Care and Development funds.

5. **P-3** – Through continuing education opportunities and state conferences, NDE will use Striving Readers and Race to the Top funds to support a continuum of training to strengthen the instructional skills of early childhood educators working with children from birth through third grade, particularly in the areas of literacy and language, math and science, and social emotional skills. Common assessment tools will be used across programs serving these age groups and data will be tracked to determine effectiveness of these efforts over the period of the grant. Funding for this project supports two staff for NDE to support and promote local school districts in developing P-3 approaches to support children's learning and close the achievement gap.

6. **Training and Technical Assistance** – DHHS and NDE will work to develop training and technical assistance focused on using the tools in Nevada's comprehensive assessment system and improving the quality of early learning and development programs to improve Silver State Star ratings, especially in communities with high populations of children with high needs. Funding for this project supports NDE staff to provide training and technical assistance to local school districts implementing a P-3 approach, and regional or state contracts to provide training and technical assistance related to use of the comprehensive assessment tools and increasing Silver State Star ratings of early learning and development programs.

7. **Statewide Leadership** – DHHS and NDE will employ staff to work together to provide leadership for the projects described herein. DHHS will create two new positions: one to provide leadership and one to manage the contracts related to implementing the project. No funding for leadership

staff is requested by NDE as they have appointed the position currently managing the State Pre-kindergarten program to serve as lead management staff for their related projects. Funding for participation in the required training and technical assistance is included in this project.

III. How Nevada Scored: Strengths & Weaknesses

In scoring the applications, reviewers were required to make thoughtful judgments about the quality of the State's application and assess, based on the criteria, the comprehensiveness, feasibility, and likely impact of the State's application. Reviewers were also asked to evaluate, for example, the extent to which the State set ambitious but achievable annual targets in its application. Additionally, reviewers needed to make informed judgments about the State's goals, the rationale for the Focused Investment Areas, the activities the State chose to undertake, and the timelines and credibility of the State's plans. The entire explanation of how the applications were scored, along with the scoring rubrics used, is provided in Appendix D of this report.

There are two anchor terms that are used repeatedly, and are important to understand when decoding reviewer feedback. Each term is defined below:

> ***High-Quality Plan.*** In determining the quality of a State's plan for a given selection criterion or competitive preference priority, reviewers assessed the extent to which the plan met the definition (as provided in the notice) of a High-Quality Plan, including whether it is feasible and has a high probability of successful implementation and contains the following components--
>
> **(a)** The key goals;
>
> **(b)** The key activities to be undertaken; the rationale for the activities; and, if applicable, where in the State the activities will be initially implemented, and where and how they will be scaled up to achieve statewide implementation;
>
> **(c)** A realistic timeline, including key milestones, for implementing each key activity;
>
> **(d)** The party or parties responsible for implementing each activity and other key personnel assigned to each activity;
>
> **(e)** Appropriate financial resources to support successful implementation of the plan;
>
> **(f)** The information requested as supporting evidence, if any, together with any additional information the State believes will be helpful to peer reviewers in judging the credibility of the plan;
>
> **(g)** The information requested in the performance measures, where applicable;
>
> **(h)** How the State will address the needs of the different types of Early Learning and Development Programs, if applicable; and
>
> (i) How the State will meet the needs of Children with High Needs, as well as the unique needs of special populations of Children with High Needs.

Using the information provided to them in the application, reviewers assessed the extent to which the proposed plan outlined within a specific selection criterion met the definition of a "*High-Quality Plan*" that is credible, feasible to implement, and likely to result in the outcomes the State put forward.

> ***Ambitious yet achievable***. In determining whether a State had ambitious yet achievable goals or targets for a given selection criterion, reviewers examined the State's goals or targets in the context of the State's plan and the evidence submitted (if any) in support of the plan. Reviewers did not look for any specific targets nor were they necessarily supposed to reward higher targets above lower ones with higher scores. Rather, reviewers were expected to reward States for developing goals and targets that, in light of each State's plan and the current context and status of the work in that State, are shown to be "ambitious yet achievable."

The sum total of the feedback from the five reviewers that scored Nevada's application amounts to the conclusion that Nevada presented a "medium-to-high quality" plan that included ambitious yet achievable targets, with "minimal-to-moderate" implementation progress. In addition to the wide scoring disparity between reviewers mentioned earlier, a few technical weaknesses mentioned in the feedback also appear to have negatively impacted scoring (e.g. generic letters of support, a confusing label on a document in the appendices).

In terms of the disparity in scoring and feedback, it is interesting to note that four of the five reviewers assigned to Nevada's application gave it a relatively positive review and their comments mirrored one another. In contrast, the low-scoring reviewer seemed to view the proposed plan quite differently from his/her peers, often providing comments that were directly opposite those of the other four. In light of that, this report strives to provide objective and balanced consideration of the feedback and scoring as a whole, in order to extract lessons from its entirety while also minimizing any confusion that may understandably occur.

The final analysis reflects Nevada's impressive ability to leverage its limited resources effectively and promote cross-systems collaboration that yields creative solutions, yet fails to make a convincing case that Nevada's plan is well-enough formulated for the reviewers to endorse such a significant investment. Rather than serve as a point-by-point breakdown and post-mortem review, the following summary is intended to capture the essence of the application's strengths and weaknesses from the reviewers' perspective, so that Nevada's leaders and policy makers in early childhood learning and development will be better positioned to succeed with future opportunities.

Successful State Systems

A review of points awarded for Nevada's application shows that we fared best in the category of "successful state systems," earning 50 out of a possible 65 possible points (77%). The category rated criteria such as past commitment to early learning and articulation of the state's rationale for its early learning agenda and goals. It also scored Nevada on how well early learning and development programs are aligned and coordinated across the state, and to what extent the budget clearly supported implementation and sustainability of the proposed plan.

"Especially commendable in this (proposed) system is the fact that the Early Childhood Advisory Council will serve as the lead between the governor's office and the public. This key role will allow for the establishment of statewide early childhood committees that are unified in their goals and actions."

One reviewer noted that "the proposal documents Nevada's current strong status in key areas that form the building blocks for a high quality learning development system." All of the reviewers commended

Nevada for documenting a history of commitment to early learning and development programs, as well as for demonstrating a significant increase in the number of children with high needs participating in ELDP within the state since 2007. Reviewers were impressed by the establishment of the Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) and the oversight role it would serve for plan implementation. Other noted strengths, as well as weaknesses, for this section are summarized below.

What They Liked

- Existing Early Learning and Development (ELD) legislation in Nevada includes the Nevada Education Reform Act of 1997 (NERA), which ensures that teachers receive professional development opportunities by creating Regional Development Programs.

- Current progress includes Nevada Infant and Toddler Learning Guidelines and Pre-K Content Standards; other documented health promotion practices, family engagement strategies and support for the development of early childhood educators.

- Planned implementation for Kindergarten Entry Assessments for the 2014-15 school year.

- Plan to develop coordinated early childhood data system is underway.

- Nevada has in place several innovative family engagement strategies.

- State presents clearly outlined goals for improving program quality and outcomes for children. Identified strategies indicate a high probability of successful achievement.

- Nevada presented a substantially implemented plan to establish strong participation and commitment to Nevada's Promise by participating agencies and other ELD stakeholders.

- Primary collaborative leadership by NDE and HHS, with ECAC as the external monitor to assure accountability and serve as the governing body. Evidence of commitment via signed MOU.

- State Plan is supported by funds from existing sources (including ARRA) – equivalent to 40% of the total budget.

- Budget demonstrates high probability of sustainability, and efficient use of available resources.

- 70% of grant funding is targeted to local implementation activities.

What They Didn't Like
- Many of the key building blocks necessary for a comprehensive early learning and development system have yet to be implemented.

- Nevada does not sufficiently articulate a comprehensive early learning and development reform agenda. Goals are not specified to the extent that they can be judged as ambitious yet achievable. Proposal does not sufficiently describe the current situation and set measurable targets for improvement.

- Nevada does not provide an overall summary of the state plan that clearly articulates how the plans proposed under each section constitute an effective reform agenda.

- No detailed plan was presented as to how involvement of key stakeholders in planning will occur.

- No information is provided regarding how participating agencies will align and leverage state funds to support the plan.

- Governance structure and organization chart are not sufficiently detailed and convey potentially conflicting leadership roles.

High Quality, Accountable Programs

Nevada's application earned 49 out of a possible 75 points in this category (66%), which rated States on their capacity, plan and progress for developing and adopting a common, statewide Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS). This included a review of how well the State promotes participation of Early Learning and Development Programs (ELDPs) in the system, and how well the system is designed to promote access to high quality ELDPs. Additionally, States were scored on their plans for rating and monitoring ELDPs and validating the State's TQRIS.

Nevada has developed a five-tiered QRIS model known as the Silver State Stars, which has just completed a two-year pilot phase. The reviewers appropriately assessed it as "partially implemented", and noted a number of strengths and innovations in the plan that is underway. However, as with other sections in Nevada's application, reviewers perceived that the specifics were missing Information regarding key activities and timelines, overarching research questions, data analysis, and appropriate research design and measures was limited, and insufficient detail was provided for elements such as: the experience of the evaluator, the parameters of the plan, criterion or research-based measures. Also, while not stated as a weakness, one reviewer noted the importance of providing technical assistance to contractors in order to support success.

What They Liked

- Nevada presented a plan that demonstrated an effective practice of stakeholder involvement and collaboration to assist in reaching the goal of having all publicly funded ELDPs participate in the TQRIS.

- Representatives from the state-funded preschool programs participated in the development of the TQRIS which clearly demonstrates their commitment to the system.

- A key strength of Nevada's TQRIS incentive design is a system of bonuses based on star levels and a tiered reimbursement schedule.

- Another strong feature is Nevada's proposal to make participation in Silver State Stars mandatory in order for programs to receive child care subsidies.

- The applicant identified valid and reliable tools (ECERS, ITERS, CLASS) to assess program quality in the TQRIS.

- Effective methods were identified to provide TQRIS and licensing information to parents enrolled in ELDPs.

- The applicant identified many effective practices (training, technical assistance, coaching) that are currently implemented to provide support for ELDP to continuously improve.

- Current incentives to increase quality include a reference to tiered reimbursement practices. Incentives are likely to succeed, as they are research/evidence-based.

"This state is proposing to incorporate a landmark endeavor by inserting that participation in Nevada's Tiered Silver State Stars will become mandatory for programs to receive childcare subsidies or quality set-aside funding."

- Several effective and appropriate supports are described that will assist working families who have children with special needs. The State's Child Care Resource and Referral system was noted as helping families find programs that meet their special needs.

- Target goals and timelines for increasing the number of ELDPs in the top two tiers were both reasonable and achievable.

- The applicant presented a plan for validating the effectiveness of the TQRIS.

- Information gathered through the assessment process will be entered into a statewide early learning data base.

- The applicant identified a process that will be utilized to determine the extent to which changes in the quality rating are related to the children's learning, development and school readiness.

"A novel and commendable approach is offered in the State Plan, involving data-driven Action Plans that involve the collaboration of the coaches, child care directors, and teachers. These action plans are based on the results of the ERS."

What They Didn't Like

- No information regarding numbers of participants in QRIS pilot studies.

- In many instances, the program standards cannot be described as functioning Tiered Program Standards.

- While plans are outlined to increase levels of education and achieve higher levels of Silver Star ratings, the current level of education qualifications for ECEs in Nevada is very low.

- Though the State presented ambitious targets for ELDP participation and included current and planned related incentives and strategies to increase involvement, specific key goals, related activities, rationale, milestones and timelines for implementing each key activity were not specifically noted.

- It is not clear why Nevada proposes to change the family eligibility determination period from six months to one year.

- Specific key goals, related key activities to be undertaken, related rationale, milestones and timelines for implementing each key activity were not specifically addressed.

- Insufficient detail is presented to describe how Nevada will achieve its targets with respect to inter-rater reliability.

- An insufficient monitoring schedule (once every two years) is noted.

- Though the applicant noted that when the State's comprehensive assessment system is established, competitive contracts will require programs to describe how full day, full year, and other support will be provided, no other planned supports/strategies were identified.

- Nevada documents a large percentage of Children with High Needs in its population. It seems possible for Nevada to develop a system that more quickly serves these children in high quality programs.

Promoting Early Learning and Development Outcomes for Children

Nevada was scored lowest in this section, earning less than half (29) of the possible 60 points in this category (48%). The selection criteria used for this section rated States on their plan for developing and using statewide, high-quality Early Learning and Development Standards. This included a review of how well the State can document its effective use of Comprehensive Assessment Systems to support improved outcomes. Reviewers also rated States on the evidence they presented to demonstrate how families are engaged and supported, as well as how effective the State is in terms of identifying and addressing health, behavioral, and developmental needs. To score well in this section, Nevada needed to document its plan and progress related to developing and using statewide, high quality ELD standards.

This section is the most reflective of the scoring disparity among reviewers noted earlier. The low-scoring reviewer for Nevada's application awarded only 10 points for this section, even though the other four reviewers ranked it significantly higher (averaging 33 points). In more than one instance, features of Nevada's application that were listed as strengths for the four reviewers were mentioned as weaknesses by the low-scoring reviewer. Some of these instances serve to underscore the fact that philosophical differences are an unavoidable reality when it comes to education, and clearly impact the way plans are designed and developed as well as how they are evaluated.

Nonetheless, while several strengths were noted related to Nevada's resources, plans and innovative ideas in this section, our poor scores for this section are directly tied to having a minimally implemented plan (at best) with too much fragmentation and not enough clarity about how to proceed with carrying out the necessary steps to effect improved outcomes for children. Additionally, there are several comments regarding Nevada's failure to address the myriad cultural and demographic issues facing families across the state in a manner that promotes access to high quality programs and improves early learning outcomes for all children.

What They Liked

- Nevada's Pre-K Standards are developmentally appropriate and cover all essential domains of early learning and development.

- Data regarding the Nevada Registry training on Family /Community relationships was included that indicated that 80 trainings have been provided on this topic since January 2011.

- As part of the plan, all training opportunities for Early Childhood Educators on the Strengthening Families Five Protective Factors, as well as on strategies for engaging families, will be inventoried and promoted.

- The upcoming School Readiness Summit provides a forum for additional training. The Summit will take place annually and serve as a forum to increase understanding and use of comprehensive assessment tools.

- NDE and DHHS are adopting a comprehensive P-3 approach that incorporates PTA standards and Strengthening Families Five Protective Factors.

- Nevada has current structures and practices, including the statewide Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC), that work with PTAs across the state.

- Nevada recently adopted a state licensing regulation requirement that licensed early childhood educators assess an enrolled child's development within 3 months after enrollment and biannually thereafter.

- Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) have been a foundational element of the TQRIS since its inception and the CLASS will be integrated into the TQRIS.

- The State Plan identifies the Strengthening Families Five Protective Factors survey that will be used by ELD providers to validate and build upon strengths already present in settings.

- A feasibility study will be conducted regarding the use of a common statewide formative assessment tool, with data used to guide training and quality improvement efforts.

- Infrastructure development for data collection is addressed.

- The State has demonstrated a high level of commitment to this through a requirement that all licensed child care providers must complete a minimum of two hours of training per year on topics related to nutrition, physical activity, and obesity prevention.

- Through the grant, the State plans to implement a stronger screening and referral system which will involve closer coordination with Medicaid.

- Nevada plans to implement a graded and star-rated license to address health, behavioral health and developmental needs.

What They Didn't Like

- No specific detail is provided related to math alignment with the K-3rd grade standards or with Striving Readers/State Literacy Plan.

- No section of the Nevada Infant and Toddler ELD Program Standards mentions the use of the child's first language.

- While the five domains included in the ELD standards are appropriate, not all required age groups (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers) are represented.

- Insufficient detail provided that outlines the steps necessary to carry out the plan.

- No plan is described for how Nevada will derive their data on existing and projected numbers and percentages of Early Childhood educators who receive training and support in meeting the health standards.

- A number of good programs are in place in Nevada, but are not consistently or widely implemented.

- No mention of a progression of culturally or linguistically appropriate standards for family engagement is made in Nevada's plan to promote school readiness.

- No specific plans are presented to support Native American families, bilingual families, or families living in isolated rural areas.

- Nevada's State Plan does not yet offer a progression of Family Engagement practices, or a set of Family Engagement standards that support children's education and development.

A Great Early Childhood Workforce

Nevada scored somewhat better in this category than the last, earning 47 out of 80 points possible, or 59 percent. In this section, States were required to describe plans for Developing a Workforce Knowledge and Competency Framework and a progression of credentials. Reviewers also rated States on their plans to support Early Childhood Educators in improving their knowledge, skills and abilities. Nevada was commended by several of the reviewers for incorporating strategies into its plan that have a high likelihood of success in terms of improving educator effectiveness. However, this was again offset significantly by the fact that the plan is not fully developed and is implemented "minimally to not at all". It is important to note the extent to which this weakness negatively impacted Nevada's overall application score, as the reviewer comments were primarily positive. Even though most of the reviewers rated Nevada's plan in this category as being of medium-to-high quality, the fact that the plan is minimally implemented hurt us here and elsewhere.

What They Liked

- Nevada's strategy for using its Core Knowledge Areas and Core Competencies for ECE as the basis for developing a statewide Workforce Knowledge and Competency Framework is clearly stated and efficient in that the core competencies focus on the preferred outcomes for the adults that work with and care for young children.

- Both documents informed by nationally recognized standards.

- It is commendable that all six higher education institutions in the state have aligned their coursework with the CKA but not necessarily with the Core Competencies. Higher Ed faculty are engaged in and support the plan for completing this alignment, as evidenced by their agreement to convene and develop consensus on this in the first half of 2012.

- The five specific strategies that Nevada has articulated for expanding access to and aligning professional development opportunities with the planned Workforce Knowledge and Competency Framework (see application for these) form a strong basis for likely success in expanding access to very effective professional development supports.

- These ideas have the potential to improve the effectiveness of early childhood educators.

- Nevada outlines a reasonable approach to addressing its stated challenges in attracting, retaining and developing child care professionals for its ELD workforce.

- Nevada has presented a well-coordinated and comprehensive plan which demonstrates full integration of high quality resources.

"Five forward-thinking and promising strategies will be added to align with Nevada's developing Workforce Knowledge and Competency Framework. These include -

- *additional competency levels on the career ladder,*
- *informal training on improving children's social-emotional domains,*
- *higher ed training linked to CLASS,*
- *online training linked to credit, and the*
- *creation of a statewide P-3 teaching credential.*

A consistent system of mentoring and coaching will be used to scaffold the progress of early childhood professionals. Finally, on an interesting and unique note, a career ladder for family, friends and relatives, who also serve as children's caregivers, will be integrated into the existing career ladder. Adding these resources and personnel will considerable strengthen the professional development arena."

Measuring Outcomes and Progress

Nevada's application scored rather weakly in this category, earning 21 of a possible 40 points. Although the application only earned 53% of the points possible, it is worth noting that again, reviewer disparity had a significant impact here. In this section, States were rated on their capacity to understand the status of children's learning and development at kindergarten entry, as well as their plans for building or enhancing an early learning data system to improve instruction, practices, services and policies. The reviewers' ratings of the two elements in Nevada's application in this category (worth 20 points each) reflected scores ranging from a low of six (out of 20) to a high of 16 (out of 20). Again, while most of the reviewers enumerated strengths of the plan itself, points were deducted because of its "minimal to no" implementation, and for lack of sufficient detail within the plan.

What They Liked

- Nevada has a plan to effectively implement a statewide Kindergarten Entry Assessment, no later than the 2014-15 school year. All school districts will be invited to participate in a pilot project to test selected assessment tools, and performance measures will be created that relate to readiness scores and other indicators.

- The State has demonstrated a strong commitment to the development and implementation of the statewide Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) as evidenced by HHS, MIECHV, and NDE committing financial resources to assure the timely development and implementation of a common statewide KEA and associated statewide data collection and reporting.

- Specific activities are planned or in place to support timely implementation.

What They Didn't Like

- Good plan, with realistic strategies and timeline – minimally/not implemented.

- While a single tool has not yet been identified or created, the existing tools that will be examined for possible implementation are not described or discussed.

Competitive Preference Priorities

In addition to the 280 points possible for the previous five categories that were defined as either "Core Areas" or "Focused Investment Areas", the RTT –ELC funding opportunity provided applicants with two "Competitive Preference Priority" areas that were optional but could yield an additional ten points each. Nevada chose to respond to both competitive priority areas.

For the first competitive preference priority, States were rated on the extent to which all Early Learning and Development Programs are included in the TQRIS. Nevada received 4 out of a possible 10 points from reviewers, who commented that its application presented a good plan that was not yet implemented. One reviewer's criticism noted that Nevada "does not have a licensing and inspection system in place that covers all programs that are not otherwise regulated by the State. (Nevada also has) no unlicensed provider inspection program." Several reviewers noted that Nevada's application states that during the first year of the grant, the State will explore changing state licensing requirements to match those of Washoe County. While they counted this as a positive feature of the plan, they also

remarked that no detail was provided as to how this change will be accomplished. In one reviewer's case, this was interpreted as Nevada not meeting the criteria for this competitive priority.

For the second competitive preference priority, ("understanding the status of children at kindergarten entry"), States had to earn at least 70% of the points available for Section E (Measuring Outcomes and Progress) in order to receive the additional 10 points. In Nevada's case, three out of five reviewers did not score the application high enough for Nevada to earn any points.

Finally, the competition required applicants to respond to an "Absolute Priority" and describe their effectiveness at promoting school readiness for children with high needs. Three of five reviewers scored Nevada as sufficiently meeting the priority.

IV. Recommendations and Next Steps

While disappointed in the news that Nevada will not receive any RTT-ELC program funding this round, the lead entities behind the proposal are acutely sensitive to how critical early literacy and childhood development are to success in school, and have continued working with the Office of the Governor, the P-16 Council, the ECAC and leaders across the state to sustain the collaborative momentum that has been built to date around early childhood education.

The awards to the nine states who were the winners of the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge shows there is a broad, bipartisan consensus in America that our country as a whole needs to provide better public services to very young children, and this is certainly true in Nevada as well. That is a significant conclusion to leverage related to Nevada's ongoing efforts and investments related to improving the quality and reach of its early childhood system, and validates the significant steps the state has already taken to improve publicly funded preschools and daycare centers.

Nevada's application and planning process outlines numerous assets that can be built upon now, including the plan underway to develop a Common Kindergarten Entry Assessment that is supported by and linked with a Comprehensive Early Childhood Data System. In choosing to proceed with these two initiatives in spite of not receiving any RTT-ELC funding, the Early Childhood Advisory Council is positioning Nevada to lay the foundation needed to institute meaningful reform over the next several years. Additionally, progress will continue in the development of Nevada's TQRIS, which will ultimately yield ratings that are useful tools for parents and encourage programs to do better. As the Silver State Stars system expands, it will include all types of early learning and development programs, and provide performance incentives for those childcare programs that receive tax dollars to participate and improve the quality of care and education in their program settings.

The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) motivated Nevada to think about how to better coordinate our fragmented early learning systems, and energized a new level of cross-system collaboration and planning at both State and local levels. This in and of itself was an important and

valuable outcome of the process. Unlike K-12 education, early learning programs are funded and administered by numerous state – and federal – agencies that don't naturally share information or data, much less collaborate on how to improve the quality of programs to ensure all children, especially high-need children, are developmentally and cognitively ready for kindergarten.

It is still unknown as to whether there will be a second round of RTT-ELC funding for early childhood programs. The Race to the Top initiative is getting $550 million in the latest budget agreement, which can be used for either states or districts. Interestingly, in language accompanying the spending bill, lawmakers directed the Department of Education to include a "robust early childhood education component" in the next round of Race to the Top. However, the amount of funding that may actually be put toward early childhood is unspecified.

In the meantime, Nevada is strongly encouraged to build from the progress underway and continue connecting the birth-to-five and K-12 systems, and improve school readiness as well as the early grades of elementary school, since we know that providing children with the right start will lead to less intervention and remediation in later grades. The bottom line for Nevada is that engaging in the Early Learning Challenge has meant taking a major step forward at a critical time for the State, which is poised to make significant progress, on its own terms, with the knowledge that there is strong and bipartisan demand for improving the quality of early learning and care programs for infants, toddlers and preschoolers so that they enter school ready to learn and achieve more positive outcomes throughout life.

(Report prepared by Kari Earle, M.Ed. – SmartStrategy Consulting Services in Reno, Nevada)

Appendix A

RACE TO THE TOP - EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE

PANEL REVIEW BY APPLICANT

NEVADA

Selection Criteria	Available Points	Reviewer 1	Reviewer 2	Reviewer 3	Reviewer 4	Reviewer 5	Average Points
A. Successful State Systems							
(A)(1) Demonstrating past commitment to early learning and development	20	17	17	19	15	20	**17.6**
(A)(2) Articulating the State's rationale for its early learning and development reform agenda and goals.	20	15	8	18	16	18	**15**
(A)(3) Aligning and coordinating early learning and development across the State	10	7	2	6	6	7	**5.6**
(A)(4) Developing a budget to implement and sustain the work of this grant.	15	15	13	10	10	11	**11.8**
B. High-Quality, Accountable Programs							
(B)(1) Developing and adopting a common, statewide Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System	10	7	6	6	9	6	**6.8**
(B)(2) Promoting participation in the State's Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System	15	10	8	9	9	8	**8.8**
(B)(3) Rating and monitoring Early Learning and Development Programs	15	9	8	9	11	9	**9.2**
(B)(4) Promoting access to high-quality Early Learning and Development Programs for Children with High Needs	20	16	12	14	16	12	**14**
(B)(5) Validating the effectiveness of the State Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System.	15	10	3	14	12	13	**10.4**
C. Promoting Early Learning and Development Outcomes for Children							
(C)(1) Developing and using statewide, high-quality Early Learning and Development Standards.	15	8	2	8	6	4	**5.6**
(C)(2) Supporting effective uses of Comprehensive Assessment Systems.	15	11	2	8	8	12	**8.2**
(C)(3) Identifying and addressing the health, behavioral, and developmental needs of Children with High Needs to improve school readiness.	15	11	6	7	8	9	**8.2**
(C)(4) Engaging and supporting families.	15	9	0	8	7	9	**6.6**

D. A Great Early Childhood Education Workforce							
(D)(1) Developing a Workforce Knowledge and Competency Framework and a progression of credentials.	20	15	10	12	12	16	13
(D)(2) Supporting Early Childhood Educators in improving their knowledge, skills, and abilities.	20	16	8	12	15	16	13.4
E. Measuring Outcomes and Progress							
(E)(1) Understanding the status of children's learning and development at kindergarten entry.	20	16	6	8	8	14	10.4
(E)(2) Building or enhancing an early learning data system to improve instruction, practices, services, and policies.	20	10	8	11	12	12	10.6
Total Points for Selection Criteria	280	202	119	179	180	196	175.2
Competitive Preference Priority 2:* Including all Early Learning and Development Programs in the Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System	10	5	1	5	6	5	4.4
Competitive Preference Priority 3:** Understanding the Status of Children's Learning and Development at Kindergarten Entry	Yes/No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	0
Absolute Priority: *** Promoting School Readiness for Children with High Needs.	Yes/No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
						Total Score	179.6

* Applicants are eligible to earn up to 10 points for Competitive Preference Priority 2: Including all Early Learning and Development Programs in the Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System. The total awarded to the applicant for Priority 2 is based on an average of individual reviewer scores in this section.

** Applicants are eligible for either 0 or 10 points for Competitive Preference Priority 3: Understanding the Status of Children's Learning and Development at Kindergarten Entry. The total awarded to the applicant for Priority 3 is not based on an average of individual reviewer scores in this section. Rather, 10 points are added to the applicant's Average Total Score if a majority of reviewers determined that the applicant has met the priority.

*** The Applicant will be determined to have met the absolute priority if the majority of reviewers responded "yes".

- Applicants could choose to respond to two or more criteria from Section C, one or more criteria from Section D and one or more criteria from Section E, as well as either or both of the competitive preference priorities. A dash (-) indicates that the applicant did not choose to respond to a particular criterion or priority.

Appendix B

RACE TO THE TOP - EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE

FINAL RESULTS

Applicant	Rank	Total Points
ARIZONA	28	186.8
ARKANSAS	31	174.2
CALIFORNIA	9	243.6
COLORADO	12	233.4
CONNECTICUT	20	211.4
DELAWARE	4	261.2
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	26	187.2
FLORIDA	19	212.6
GEORGIA	25	189.8
HAWAII	36	135.2
ILLINOIS	14	226.2
IOWA	34	147.0
KANSAS	33	150.0
KENTUCKY	21	208.4
MAINE	17	220.6
MARYLAND	6	252.0
MASSACHUSETTS	2	267.0
MICHIGAN	18	216.0
MINNESOTA	7	250.8
MISSISSIPPI	35	142.6
MISSOURI	24	197.8
NEBRASKA	32	163.8
NEVADA	29	179.6
NEW JERSEY	15	221.8
NEW MEXICO	10	236.0
NEW YORK	23	198.0
NORTH CAROLINA	1	269.6
OHIO	5	261.0
OKLAHOMA	30	175.6
OREGON	13	232.8
PENNSYLVANIA	16	221.2
PUERTO RICO	37	104.4
RHODE ISLAND	8	243.8
VERMONT	27	187.2
WASHINGTON	3	263.8
WEST VIRGINIA	22	198.4
WISCONSIN	11	234.0

Appendix C

Rank	Applicant	Final Score	Reviewers' Scores (out of 280 points)					CPP 2 TQRIS (O-10 pts)	CPP 3 K Entry (0 or 10 pts)	Absolute Priority (Y/N)	% of avail pts earned (out of 300)
			R 1	R2	R3	R4	R5				
1	NORTH CAROLINA	269.6	256	256	248	252	236	10	10	Yes	89.9%
2	MASSACHUSETTS	267	230	270	226	267	249	8.6	10	Yes	89.0%
3	WASHINGTON	263.8	251	246	230	268	225	9.8	10	Yes	87.9%
4	DELAWARE	261.2	264	243	261	247	243	9.6	0	Yes	87.1%
5	OHIO	261	247	258	237	234	236	8.6	10	Yes	87.0%
6	MARYLAND	252	242	234	264	252	218	-	10	Yes	84.0%
7	MINNESOTA	250.8	256	226	222	232	226	8.4	10	Yes	83.6%
8	RHODE ISLAND	243.8	226	233	222	219	232	7.4	10	Yes	81.3%
9	CALIFORNIA	243.6	214	230	242	245	237	-	10	Yes	81.2%
10	NEW MEXICO	236	228	220	241	246	156	7.8	10	Yes	78.7%
11	WISCONSIN	234	229	225	219	190	221	7.2	10	Yes	78.0%
12	COLORADO	233.4	205	230	213	218	213	7.6	10	Yes	77.8%
13	OREGON	232.8	242	239	188	229	237	5.8	0	Yes	77.6%
14	ILLINOIS	226.2	253	206	223	237	169	8.6	0	Yes	75.4%
15	NEW JERSEY	221.8	203	213	220	189	234	-	10	Yes	73.9%
16	PENNSYLVANIA	221.2	210	202	234	203	242	3	0	Yes	73.7%
17	MAINE	220.6	228	182	213	256	224	-	-	Yes	73.5%
18	MICHIGAN	216	229	191	223	176	218	8.6	0	Yes	72.0%
19	FLORIDA	212.6	209	200	234	211	159	-	10	Yes	70.9%
20	CONNECTICUT	211.4	185	220	145	223	228	1.2	10	Yes	70.5%
21	KENTUCKY	208.4	183	187	188	204	200	6	10	Yes	69.5%
22	WEST VIRGINIA	198.4	204	169	213	167	189	-	10	No	66.1%
23	NEW YORK	198	169	218	222	196	185	-	0	Yes	66.0%
24	MISSOURI	197.8	221	177	209	193	168	4.2	-	Yes	65.9%
25	GEORGIA	189.8	163	165	139	231	229	4.4	0	Yes	63.3%
26	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	187.2	195	165	197	188	164	5.4	0	Yes	62.4%
27	VERMONT	187.2	162	196	179	194	155	-	10	Yes	62.4%
28	ARIZONA	186.8	186	167	194	179	208	-	0	Yes	62.3%
29	NEVADA	179.6	202	119	179	180	196	4.4	0	Yes	59.9%
30	OKLAHOMA	175.6	164	167	151	195	166	7	0	Yes	58.5%
31	ARKANSAS	174.2	173	216	180	193	85	4.8	0	Yes	58.1%
32	NEBRASKA	163.8	155	170	185	115	194	-	0	Yes	54.6%
33	KANSAS	150	132	139	140	151	157	6.2	0	No	50.0%
34	IOWA	147	144	111	151	172	157	-	0	No	49.0%
35	MISSISSIPPI	142.6	115	180	147	152	87	6.4	0	Yes	47.5%
36	HAWAII	135.2	141	162	162	125	23	2.6	10	Yes	45.1%
37	PUERTO RICO	104.4	108	79	108	115	89	4.6	0	No	34.8%

Note: a dash (-) indicates that the applicant did not choose to respond to the criterion or priority